



International Illegal Trade in Wildlife: Threats and U.S. Policy

Liana Sun Wyler, Pervaze A. Sheikh

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International Illegal Trade in Wildlife: Threats and U.S. Policy Liana Sun Wyler, Pervaze A. Sheikh Global trade in illegal wildlife is a potentially vast illicit economy, estimated to be worth billions of dollars each year. Some of the most lucrative illicit wildlife commodities include elephant ivory, rhino horn, sturgeon caviar, and so-called "bushmeat." Wildlife smuggling may pose a transnational security threat as well as an environmental one. Numerous sources indicate that some organized criminal syndicates, insurgent groups, and foreign military units may be involved in various aspects of international wildlife trafficking. Limited anecdotal evidence also indicates that some terrorist groups may be engaged in wildlife crimes, particularly poaching, for monetary gain. Some observers claim that the participation of such actors in wildlife trafficking can therefore threaten the stability of countries, foster corruption, and encourage violence to protect the trade.

Reports of escalating exploitation of protected wildlife, coupled with the emerging prominence of highly organized and well-equipped illicit actors in wildlife trafficking, suggests that policy challenges persist. Commonly cited challenges include legal loopholes that allow poachers and traffickers to operate with impunity, gaps in foreign government capabilities to address smuggling problems, and persistent structural drivers such as lack of alternative livelihoods in source countries and consumer demand.

To address the illicit trade in endangered wildlife, the international community has established, through the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (CITES), a global policy framework to regulate and sometimes ban exports of selected species. Domestic, bilateral, regional, and global efforts are intended to support international goals of sustainable conservation, effective resource management, and enforcement of relevant laws and regulations.

Increased recognition of the potential consequences of wildlife trafficking has caused some observers and policymakers to question the efficacy of existing U.S. and international responses and consider new options for addressing the problem. In November 2012, for example, then-Secretary of State Hillary Clinton announced the beginning of a revitalized effort to combat international wildlife trafficking. In July 2013, President Barack Obama issued Executive Order 13648 on Combating Wildlife Trafficking. The Executive Order identified poaching of protected species and the illegal trade in wildlife and their derivative parts and products as an escalating international crisis that is in the national interest of the United States to combat.

The U.S. Congress has played a role in responding to these ongoing challenges and evaluating U.S. policy to combat international wildlife trafficking. Over time, Congress has enacted a wide range of laws to authorize conservation programs, appropriate domestic and international funding for wildlife protection and natural resource capacity building, and target and dismantle wildlife trafficking operations. In recent years, Congress has also held hearings and events that have addressed the growing problem of wildlife crimes and raised key questions for next steps. Interest in wildlife crime may continue in the 113th Congress. Congressional activity may include evaluating the seriousness of the threat as a national security issue, as well as raising questions regarding the effectiveness of existing policies, ranging from biodiversity programs to anti-crime activities.

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